

# Hitting the mark: finding a dirty, rotten cast

*Editor's Note: The Kelley Theatre will present the world amateur premiere of "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" May 30 to June 1, June 6-8 and 13-15. This is the first in a three-part series taking a behind-the-scene look at the production.*

By: Susan Huseman  
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Mike Watts hasn't sung since his high school choir days. He's never been in a theater production.

But that didn't stop him when he heard the Kelley Theatre was holding auditions for the musical adaptation of "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels."

He said the 1988 comedy starring Steve Martin and Michael Caine as con artists on the French Riviera is one of his favorite movies.

"I'm a big fan of comedies, and I'm a huge Steve Martin fan," said Watts, an Army captain and the trial counsel for the Stuttgart Law Center.

On the second night of auditions, Brett Harwood, the Kelley Theatre artistic director, prepared 15 stage hopefuls for what they were about to get themselves into.

Harwood was looking for 16-25 people who could sing, dance and act.

"The musical features three main characters," he told the group. "The rest of the show moves around by the chorus, who play multiple roles. Each person in the chorus has about six costume changes ... they play bell hops, people at a casino, people on a train, conductors — and they usually do it to a musical number.

"When you sing tonight, you're singing for leading roles," said Harwood. "It's great if you put on your audition sheets that you want a particular role, but we're going to look at everyone for every single role."

Bill Girard, the pianist at the Stuttgart Opera House, led the singers through a warm-up routine.

The group — six men and nine women — were then split up by sex to learn their songs: "Chimp in a Suit," "Great Big Stuff" and "Love is My Legs" for the men and "What Was a Woman To Do" and "Oklahoma?" for the women.

These songs are considered character numbers. "Character numbers fall pretty dead unless you have an overblown character to go with them," Harwood told the singers.

“The less character you give the more you have to rely on your vocals. So, if you don’t want to rely on your vocals, give it more character. Play it big.”

Kelley Theatre veterans such as Walter Fritz and Jeanne Ragonese were auditioning. But there were plenty of new faces.

Kyrell Kendrick and his wife, Bre, were both auditioning for the first time. Neither has theater experience.

Kendrick, a staff sergeant with U.S. Africa Command, came to support his wife but then decided to audition as well. The closest he’s been to a theater, he said, was a theater appreciation class in college.

“I was in a few choirs here and there,” said Bre. “I was home-schooled during high school, but I went to all my friends’ school plays. I would have been a theater geek if I’d gone to normal high school.”

Pete Cap was hopeful he’d make the cut. “I auditioned for “Fiddler on the Roof.” I made it, but I had to drop out. The short time I was in the cast was a lot of fun, so I definitely want to try again,” he said.

It was past 9 p.m. when Harwood had run everyone through the songs. “Usually, we have three nights of open auditions, and then we do crisis management. That’s usually about getting men involved. For example, “Oliver,” “High School Musical,” “Fiddler on the Roof” — we had the auditions, call backs, and then there was panic: Please, if you’re a man, come out and do the show. We’re used to doing that.

“We had six guys tonight, 10 last night. To have 16 guys show up for a musical so far — and a musical that actually requires 12 men in the entire production — that’s pretty good.”

Harwood’s main goal is to fill the principle roles. “You worry about the central characters, and you pull them out first,” he said. “Then you go into the chorus and start filling the secondary and supporting parts, parts with one line. As we start going into chorus rehearsals, you get to hear people sing specific things, and then you can decide which other roles they will play.”

At call backs, Harwood found himself still searching for the third main character, Freddie. “It’s a very high tenor part. We brought back all the guys who I think have the range to sing the part, but they also have to act. It’s a tricky part, because this role plays several characters: He’s the young, snotty, crude American, he’s the sophisticated wannabe con-man, the genetically inbred cousin, Ruprecht, and he’s a wounded Army Soldier.”

By the end of the night, Harwood had found his Freddie. Mike Watts, the Steve Martin fan, would be playing the same role Martin had in the film version.

It is very rare when a first timer comes in and gets a leading role, said Harwood. But he wanted a rock voice for the role, and Watts had it.

“One nice thing about Mike is that he’s a lawyer,” said Harwood. “He’s smart. He understands the context in which the lines need to be placed. He does an inflection in his voice automatically. We’re also blessed that he has a good sense of comic timing, which is something you have to learn. You’re rarely born with it. And he sings.”

Watts joins Ron Paoletti and Denise Woodmansee as the main characters.

“Fifty percent of a director’s job is picking the right people for the right part,” said Harwood. “There’s a great quote from a bad movie about a hockey team that says, ‘It’s not our job to pick the best players. It’s our job to pick the right players,’ and it really is true.”

If casting is indeed 50 percent of a director’s job, with eight weeks until opening night, Harwood is already halfway there.

For more information about “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, visit [www.kelleytheatre.de](http://www.kelleytheatre.de).

# Hitting the mark: musical gets its legs

*Editor's Note: The Kelley Theatre will present the world amateur premiere of "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" June 6-8 and 13-15. For tickets, visit [www.kelleytheater.de](http://www.kelleytheater.de). This is the second in a three-part series taking a behind-the-scene look at the production.*

By: Susan Huseman  
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Drama — you expect it from a theater company — on stage, that is.

But the casting and rehearsal process for the musical "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," Kelley Theatre's current production, has had its own dramatic moments.

Just two days before auditions began, Alan Buxkemper, the musical director, injured his shoulder while playing baseball with his two boys. The injury was so bad it required surgery, and Buxkemper was incapacitated for weeks.

"Alan's shoulder injury prevented him from being at the auditions and some of the rehearsals," said Brett Harwood, the production's director.

In fact, opening night was pushed back a week to May 30 because of the loss of Buxkemper.

And two weeks before opening night, Jorge Witzsch, one of the principle performers, had to withdraw for personal reasons, and a replacement had to be found quickly.

"Jeannie Ragonese, another principle, mentioned Heidelberg's Roadside Theater had just wrapped up "Beauty and the Beast," said Harwood. "David Burmedi played Lumiere, the candlestick, who is a charming French character similar to Jorge's character, Andre. And he's won a couple of Topper Awards for comedy.

"Burmedi made the commitment to drive back and forth from Heidelberg to rehearse," continued Harwood. "He started rehearsing May 20. He literally had 10 days to learn a major role and all that goes with it — learn all the lines, all the songs, the dances, costuming."

According to Harwood, these are huge issues, but community theater is rife with lots of little dramas. "Someone misses a rehearsal, or a person who you thought was going to be able to dance can't," Harwood said.

"But any time you lose a part of the production crew it's tough because every section — set design, light design, costume design, performers — has to be doing their thing," Harwood said.

Rehearsals are a building block process. “The costume people can’t start building or making costumes until they have the measurements of the people in the roles. The choreography can’t be done until you know the number of couples who are going to be dancing.”

And everyone needs to know the music. Harwood usually gives the chorus and principles a week to get familiar with the music before they go on to staging and choreography rehearsals.

“There is a period in rehearsal called the table stage,” said Harwood. “Sometimes the best thing you can do is set at a table and read, get the comic timing down, get the inflection correctly, if there is innuendo that is supposed to be in a statement. It’s the same thing with the music — you’ve got to sit down and listen to the music. It’s not about dancing — it’s about listening to a piano player plunking out your part.

“After you get a little bit of a foundation then you move to the second stage of rehearsals, which is staging,” he said. “While the chorus is rehearsing, you’re starting to block the scenes without music with the principles. Then you start staging the musical numbers.”

The principle performers begin to work on blending with the chorus, and the cast works on how the musical numbers transition into the scene changes. Harwood said this is when a show starts getting its “legs.”

“After that, then you start putting the musical numbers together with scenes, so that a scene will segue into a musical number,” he said. Then costumes are introduced into the process. “Rehearsing in jeans and sweat pants is very different than in a long ball gown.”

Props get added next, and the sets follow. Up until this point, rehearsals have been scene by scene, with frequent stops and starts. Harwood said the next step is to try and do a complete run through. Then the lights go out.

Rehearsing in the dark is a challenge. “You’ve seen everything backstage — you always knew where your props were — but now suddenly you have to deal with no lights backstage, and you have to be doing it while changing your costumes. Now, it’s not just about making a costume change, it’s about making the change in time to still get your props, which are in the dark someplace,” Harwood said.

It has to be this way, he said, so that the technical director can work on the lighting design.

Rehearsals started April 7. Felix Loewy, a local professional musician and volunteer at Kelley Theatre, took over as piano player. He also took over the responsibility of organizing an orchestra for the production.

Fridays and Saturdays were the only days rehearsals weren’t held. But even Saturday was not a day off.

Most Saturdays, between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m., the cast members were expected to help build sets at work calls.

On May 17, Kelley Theatre was abuzz with activity as performers and volunteers built and painted sets and made props while the costumers fit costumes.

Jennifer Vollmer and Sparks Moeller were putting together more than 240 costumes. “The women have seven costume changes, and the men have about five each,” said Vollmer, who has dressed Kelley Theatre performers for 14 years.

“Most of the costumes come from the costume warehouse in Darmstadt. But there are always bits and pieces you have to make for every show,” said Moeller.

The leading characters of Christine and Muriel will have a few custom-made costumes. “It’s a very particular looking kind of a show,” said Moeller. “It’s very crisp and sophisticated. Christine and Muriel have the big, solo parts. The big production numbers revolve around them. A lot of times a custom look — especially when you want a particular color for a certain scene — is the only way to get it.”

While Vollmer and Moeller fitted costumes, downstairs, instead of piano melodies, the theater was filled with the pounding of hammers, the droning of drills and the smell of paint.

Set designers Deb Stevens and Barb Heidt had cast members building a craps table and painting set pieces.

“This is a very light, sarcastic, funny show, so you don’t want to take the set too seriously. It’s why we can get away with a caricature of a balcony. If it were a very serious show, the sets would be more detailed and true to life,” Heidt said.

Eleven sets have to be created and “every thing has to move and come off the stage,” said Heidt. “You also have to figure out what is the littlest thing we can get away with so people will know, for example, that the characters are at an airport. We use a suitcase and some stairs.”

Dennis Austin was busy making French fries. He used a hot blade to carve the fries from a block of Styrofoam. “There’s a number where Christine sings, “Here I am, these guys are French, these fries are French.”

Austin and his wife, Ronda, are both in the chorus. “It’s my first show,” he said. “I’ve helped out a lot in the past because my wife and daughter, Elyse, have been in two shows.

They’ve had so much fun, so I wanted to do it too.”

The biggest challenge for Austin has been the dancing. “There are some really elaborate dance steps,” he said. “But for me, I’ve got very simple steps to learn. It’s more about walking around to the music.”

“We’re at rehearsals at least three days a week,” he said. “I get off work, go to the theater and get home at 10:30 p.m. But it’s even worse on the principles because they’re here every night.”

“We started rehearsals right away, so weekends were shot,” said Ron Paoletti, who stars as Lawrence Jameson. Paoletti’s family lives in Heidelberg. “I race home on Saturdays, say hello and leave.

“Community theater is like having a second job,” he said. “For most of us — our alarms go off at 5:30 a.m. We go to work all day, grab some munchies and head for the theater, and in between, try to see family and friends.”

“People give a significant amount of their lives to making this thing work. So when it all comes together, it’s a small, little miracle,” said Harwood.

# Hitting the mark: giving them what they want

*Editor's Note: This is the last in a three-part series taking a behind-the-scene look at the Kelley Theatre's world amateur premiere of "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," which closed June 15.*

By: Susan Huseman  
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Mike Watts hobbled on crutches into the Kelley Theatre June 13 with his right leg in a brace.

It was an ironic twist of fate, since Watts, an Army captain and one of the principle leads in the theater's musical production of "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," spends half of the show sitting in a wheelchair pretending to be a soldier who can't walk.

"Interoffice olympics," he said of the injury, which occurred the day before ... something about slipping while standing on a soccer ball and twisting his knee, he explained.

"Sports are dangerous," said Brett Harwood, the Kelley Theatre's artistic director and director of the musical. "I tell people, never do sports — do theater."

"We'll make an announcement to the audience," said Harwood. "You just have to play the cards that are dealt you."

With only 90 minutes remaining before the Friday night curtain, Harwood pondered how the show might be affected. "The end of the first act — when Mike appears in the wheelchair for the first time — always gets a laugh. But I don't think it will now because the audience will think, "Oh, he's getting worse."

Harwood also has to reconsider the blocking and choreography for "All About Ruprecht," a number where Watts poses as con man Lawrence's mentally-challenged brother Ruprecht. "That's the only number where he is really physical. We'll go play with it. Everything else should be OK."

The world amateur premiere of the musical comedy opened May 30 and has been a relaxed, peaceful run with only a few hiccups during the performances, according to Harwood. There have been minor problems with the computers and lighting, though Watts' injury is by far the biggest.

It isn't serious enough to call in the understudy, who just happens to be Harwood. "If he couldn't do it, I would go on, but I'm the only person who knows where the sound and light cues go," he said.



During the shows, Harwood sits with the audience in the last row of the theater, watching the production and communicating with the backstage crew via a two-way radio.

“Everything has a cue ... sounds, scene changes, black outs, lights,” he said.

“I love performing, and it’s a great part, but it’s too much to be onstage,” Harwood added. “You do the production a disservice if you’re onstage and can’t take care of the lights and the sound.”

During the run, four performances were sold out, including the last three shows on June 13-15. “Almost always the last weekend is sold out, at least it is for a musical,” said Harwood. By then, people have heard others talking about the show, or they’ve put off going to see their friends in the play. There are also those who will wait to attend, so the production will be cleaner, he said.

“There’s a great director who once said opening night is the cleanest and the best it will ever be ... because for weeks and weeks you’ve been polishing it and straightening out every little error. The actors are scared of you,” said Harwood.

The reality is somewhere in between. “With each performance the performers get more comfortable and freer with the blocking. That fills out the performance. It makes them more fun to watch,” Harwood explained.

“At the same time, the show gets sloppier technically. That’s why, unless a show is very closely controlled, it’s not quite as clean. We’ve seen it happen a few times with soloists who don’t quite hit their marks,” he said.

Performers drop lines and miss cues, but they are unnoticed to the untrained eye. “It’s always pretty funny when the actors tell me they missed something ... usually I don’t even see it,” said Harwood.

While Harwood sees the theater volunteers — performers, musicians, costumers, set designers, backstage crew and box office help — as one set of customers, he always keeps the paying audience in mind.

“We won every award we could win last year,” he said. “We’re really proud of where we are — the level of talent and the level of the shows that we do. But that sets the bar higher and higher. The audience expects it to be met every time, and when you slip down a notch or two they get restless. You have to constantly keep on getting new people up on the stage and in the seats.”

“Dirty Rotten Scoundrels” is the theater’s final production of the season. It also happens to be Harwood’s 50th for the Kelley Theatre, spanning a 20-year stint. It is also his last. Harwood will move to Hawaii at the end of July to work for the Richardson Theater at Fort Shafter.

“I’ve done this for 20 years,” he said. “My first show was in May ’88. And my last opened May 2008. There is that little twinge of sadness ... last show, last run.”

“People come up and tell me the theater is going to die after I leave. But that’s what they said about my predecessor. The theater will go on, no matter who’s in charge,” said Harwood.